

CAROL C. MUKHOPADHYAY  
 “Caucasian”



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Language reflects and shapes how we perceive and experience the world around us. The “race” concept is a particularly powerful example, referencing an elaborate U.S. world view rooted in colonialism and slavery and a “race”-based system of inequality. As we go about dismantling this ideology, especially scientific racism and the false notion that races are naturally occurring, biologically-rooted subdivisions of the human species, we must also critically examine the language and labels historically associated with these outmoded systems of racial classification.

One of the most pernicious, and remarkably persistent, remnants of the old ideology is the term “Caucasian.”<sup>1</sup> Over the past decades, many labels

<sup>1</sup> There are others, including “color”-linked terminology, such as white and black; the continuation of a race/ethnicity distinction, despite the tortuous and confusing definitions that result; and language inconsistent with what we know to be continuous gradations of biological traits like skin color (“darker” vs. “dark,” “lighter” vs. “light” skin color).

associated with racial science have been challenged (e.g. “Mongoloid,” “Negroid”). Today, employing such linguistic fossils would immediately mark the user as seriously out of touch with modern understandings of race. Yet, the word “Caucasian” is surprisingly alive and well in both scientific and popular usage.

Isn’t it time we got rid of Caucasian? Some argue that it’s “only a label” and we shouldn’t quibble over mere semantics! But language is one of the most systematic, subtle, and significant vehicles for transmitting cultural knowledge, including racial ideology. The word “Caucasian” encapsulates the old racial science, carries a misplaced scientific “cache” and precision, and evokes a particularly problematic set of images. “Caucasian” also conveys broader messages about who has “culture” and “ethnicity” and what constitutes real “Americanness.” Every time we use “Caucasian,” I would argue, we are reinforcing – rather than unraveling – the old U.S. racial world view.

## Caucasians and 18th–20th-Century Racial Science

The term Caucasian originated in the 18th century as part of the developing European science of racial classification (Mukhopadhyay et al. 2014, especially Part II, Chapters 5, 6, 7, and 9). After visiting the Caucasus Mountains region, between the Caspian and Black seas, German anatomist Johann Blumenbach declared its inhabitants the most beautiful in the world, created in “God’s image,” and deemed the area the likely site of human origins (wrong – it was Africa). He decided light-skinned peoples from this region and Europeans belonged to the same race, which he called Caucasian.

Blumenbach proposed four other races, all considered physically and morally “degenerate” forms of “God’s original creation.” He classified Africans (excepting lighter-skinned North Africans) as “Ethiopians” (black). He split non-Caucasus Asians into two separate races: the “Mongoloid” or “Yellow” race of China and Japan and the “Malayan” or “Brown” race, which included Aboriginal Australians and Pacific Islanders. Native Americans were the fifth or “Red” race.



Blumenbach's system of racial classification was adopted in the United States. The RACE Exhibit's Scientific Racism section shows how American scientists measured skull size to try to prove that Caucasians had larger brains and were smarter than other races. Racial science dovetailed with 19th-century evolutionary theories, ranking races from "primitive" ("savages") to "advanced" ("civilized"), with Caucasians on top. Racial hierarchies were used to justify slavery and racial discrimination.

The U.S. legal system drew upon Blumenbach's definitions to decide who was eligible to be a naturalized citizen, a privilege the 1790 Naturalization Act restricted to "whites." Powerful U.S. elites hoped racial science could provide a scientific basis for a racially restrictive citizenship policy. Yet, Blumenbach's Caucasians included groups like Armenians, Persians, North Indians, and some North Africans. Clearly, these were not the "whites" envisioned by lawmakers in 1790 – that is, Europeans, especially northern and western European Christians. White and Caucasian had to be reinterpreted! In 1923, the Court rejected the naturalization petition of an immigrant from northern India, saying he was Caucasian but *not* white – citing, among other things, his skin color and his non-Christian religion.

This constant politically motivated redefinition of white and Caucasian continued in the 20th century, as millions of new immigrants threatened to change the face (and religion) of the United States. How were newcomers to fit into a racialized, unequal social system? Once again, racial science came to the rescue. By the 1920s, U.S. eugenicists<sup>2</sup> had divided Caucasians into four ranked subraces: Nordic, Alpine, Mediterranean, and Jew (Semitic), with Nordics ranked highest intellectually and morally. These allegedly scientific racial subdivisions were used to justify discriminatory immigration laws that preserved the U.S. ethnic dominance of Nordics (and Protestant Christians).

It took World War II, and the horrors of Nazi racism, to discredit racial science and eugenics.

Distinctions among European Americans declined – in housing patterns, education, occupations, and the legal system, if not always socially. Even Jews became "White folks." "Caucasian," however, rather than disappearing, replaced the thoroughly tainted, Nazi-linked "Aryan" race label, becoming equivalent to "white"; that is, to European Americans.

The U.S. racial classification system continues to shift in response to historical, economic, and political events. Surprisingly, Blumenbach's conceptual framework of five major macroracial categories remains today (cf. the U.S. census). Nevertheless, overall racial discourse reflects new understandings of race (and its fuzzy boundary with "ethnicity"). Most old pseudoscientific racial or "color" labels (e.g. "the Yellow race") have been replaced by language that more appropriately references geographic region, nations, or cultures rather than biological traits (e.g. Asian Americans, Hawaiians.). Yet, "Caucasian" persists despite its roots in discredited racial science. Indeed, it seems to carry a scientific, authoritative weight not associated with other racial labels nor with the increasingly popular "white." A sampling of major government websites (Department of Education, Census Bureau, NIH) produced an astonishing number of formal reports, state-wide documents, and research studies that employ the term "Caucasian," especially in formal contexts and data summaries.<sup>3</sup>

Most striking, and particularly worrisome, is the continuing use of "Caucasian" in the scientific and medical community. An August 20, 2018 search of the U.S. National Library of Medicine scientific database for "Caucasian" produced 97 576 articles. Although some go back to the 1940s, 47 568 appeared within the last 10 years (i.e. 2008–2018), with 23 956 since 2013! Clearly, "Caucasian" persists in health-related research, even as "ethnicity" replaces "race" (including for

<sup>2</sup> Eugenics sought to "improve" the human species, including through race-related breeding practices such as sterilizing women from "inferior" races and preventing "superior"-race women from gaining access to contraception and other birth-reduction methods.

<sup>3</sup> My own culturally diverse and culturally sensitive university seems to avoid "Caucasian," at least in Institutional Research Student Population reports, substituting Ethnicity. But it continues to use "White" for European Americans, versus "Asian," "Pacific Islander" for other ethnic groups. Some recent MA theses and at least one 2018 PhD Dissertation in Nursing used "Caucasian" to describe European American populations.



Caucasians) and narrower populations are studied (e.g. Korean Americans, Japanese, Hawaiians) (cf. Lee and Mason 2018). My local Kaiser Permanente health center, with a majority of non-European American staff and clientele, continues to employ “Caucasian,” describing me as “Caucasian” on my bone density test. And a prominent wall chart in my doctor’s office compares “Ischemic Stroke by Race for African Americans and Caucasians.” I wonder how my Indian American doctor would classify herself (or my husband).

### An empty category

The word “Caucasian,” beyond its association with discredited racial science, conveys a false scientific precision and scientific authority. It is an esoteric, complex, three-syllable word whose meaning is not easily inferred. As used in the United States, it bears virtually no resemblance to the ancestral origins of those designated Caucasian. There are, of course, “real” Caucasians ... people from the Caucasus, with myriad languages, cultures, histories. But few U.S. Americans could locate the Caucasus on a map nor specify its countries or linguistic groups (e.g. Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, parts of North Iran, and central southern Russia).

So ... what associations does Caucasian invoke? Virtually none ... except “white.” U.S. Caucasians do not speak Caucasian, there is no (in the United States) Caucasian music or Caucasian dancing or food. Caucasian is an empty category, vulnerable to being defined as biologically rooted rather than a cultural invention.

Of course, there is no single language, food, religion, or culture for “Asia,” “Africa,” or the Pacific Islands. Nor are these clearly defined land masses. All U.S. macroracial categories, even if linked to geographical regions, are artificial, human-made classifications that lack clear boundaries. All mask enormous cultural, linguistic, political, and historical complexity.

This diversity is finally being recognized. The 2010 census question on Race includes subcategories of Asians: Asian Indian, Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese, along with “Other Asian,” a write-in section. Pacific Islanders can be Hawaiians, Samoans, Chamorro, and other

groups. And American Indians or Alaska Natives specify their tribe.

Only two macroracial categories lack subgroups: “Black or African American” and the category “White.” Apparently, these are relatively homogeneous racial groups/identities, although Nigerians, Puerto Ricans, Irish, and Greeks might feel otherwise. Even more significant, only one macroracial category, “White,” has a single color-based label with no geographically-based alternative.<sup>4</sup>

Using “white” or “Caucasian” (vs. European American) ignores geography-culture-history and the significant identities of most European Americans until recently (e.g. Irish, Italian, German, English). White, like Caucasian, implies that the European-descended population is a coherent, stable, fixed, homogenous, biologically-distinct entity, again reinforcing obsolete biological notions of “race.”

### Real versus hyphenated Americans

“Caucasian” (vs. European American) also suggests a unique relationship to “America” and “Americanness.” European Americans’ ancestors, like most Americans, originally came from another country. Today, they are no more authentically “American” than any other race/ethnic group. Compared to Native Americans, all are recent immigrants. And most African Americans’ ancestors were brought to these shores long before most European Americans migrated. Indeed, the majority of today’s U.S. “Caucasians” probably had no ancestors here in the 19th century! “Caucasian,” however, masks this “foreign” ancestry.

The word “Caucasian” in other ways exacerbates the U.S. tendency to equate “American” with European descent (e.g. “American” food). Linguistically, adding a modifier to a generic term signifies that the modified form is less “normal.” The more fundamental, typical form is left unmarked. (For example, we add the modifier “male” to “nurse” only to mark the unusual,

<sup>4</sup> This may partially reflect the old Blumenthal definition of “Caucasian” as including Europeans and people from the Caucasus region. This is a constant and politicized discussion with modifications since the 2010 census (e.g. elimination of “Negro”). See [https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/omb/fedreg\\_1997standards](https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/omb/fedreg_1997standards), accessed July 12, 2019.

abnormal category of male nurses. The typical, generic “nurse” is female).

Most standard U.S. racial category labels *other* than Caucasian (or “white”) add a modifier, such as Asian- or African- or Chinese-, to “American.” Why the asymmetry? Such modifiers, unless used for all racial-ethnic groups, subtly marginalize the “marked” groups, implying they are not fully Americans. They are, through language, cast as eternal “foreigners,” regardless of how many generations they have been in the United States.

### Who has “ethnicity,” “culture,” and an “ethnic identity”?

Ironically, we are starting to talk as if “ethnicity” and “culture” are attributes of only some racial-ethnic groups, usually traditionally marginalized groups. Many schools have “cultural” organizations or events to celebrate “cultural” diversity. But how often do they include “Caucasian” ethno-cultural groups? But then, what is “Caucasian” culture?

Of course, the dominant institutionalized culture in the United States remains strongly European (northwestern, Christian) influenced. But this is only *one among many* cultural traditions brought to the United States by immigrants. In a world where ethnic identities are a significant and often positive dimension of personal identity, European

Americans should also be able to explore their ethnic identities and ancestries.

How can we eradicate “Caucasian,” this pernicious remnant of the past? Unfortunately, the usual substitute, “white,” has many of the same problems! Moreover, labels like “white,” “black,” and “people of color” linguistically (and perceptually) reinforce the archaic ideology of race as biology. This increasingly popular terminology also collapses multiple, complex U.S. ethnicities/races/communities into simplistic but familiar oppositional dualities (white—others), even if they take new forms (“white” vs. “people of color”).

“European American” is a more appropriate substitute for “Caucasian” than “white.” It parallels the language for other macroracial U.S. groups, highlighting national origins rather than biology, and allowing for diverse experiences while not ignoring privileges historically accorded those of European ancestry. The label “European American” may sound too bulky or formal at first ... but we have managed to cope with “African American,” “Asian American,” “Mexican American,” “Pacific Islander,” and other multisyllabic labels. And we can easily come up with shorter versions, such as “Euro” or “Euros.” We humans are able to accommodate new terminology rather quickly, especially if we make a conscious effort, are around others using it, and recognize the importance of its use!